

Called to be witnesses through what we say

1 May 2022 – Easter 3

BIBLE READINGS

Psalm 30:1-3, 8-12 (responsively)

I will exalt you, Lord,

for you lifted me out of the depths
and did not let my enemies gloat over me.

**Lord my God, I called to you for help,
and you healed me.**

Lord, you brought me up from the realm of the dead;
you spared me from going down to the pit.

To you, Lord, I called;

to the Lord I cried for mercy:

‘What is gained if I am silenced,
if I go down to the pit?

Will the dust praise you?

Will it proclaim your faithfulness?

Hear, Lord, and be merciful to me;

Lord, be my help.’

You turned my mourning into dancing;

you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.

Lord my God, I will praise you for ever.

Acts 1:8

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Acts 4:1-10

The priests and the captain of the Temple Guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. ...

The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest’s family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: ‘By what power or what name did you heal this man?’

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: ‘Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.’

Acts 5:27-32

[Having again been detained for speaking about Jesus] the apostles were brought in before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. ‘We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,’ he said. ‘Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.’

Peter and the other apostles replied: ‘We must obey God rather than human beings! The God of our

ancestors raised Jesus from the dead – whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.’

Acts 11:19-21

Now following the stoning to death of Stephen, those who had been scattered by the persecution travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

MESSAGE Called to be witnesses through what we say

What happens to a movement when the founder and charismatic leader dies, especially when there is strong and sometimes violent opposition to the movement? Does it go underground? morph into something less radical? or just fade away? Many times in history, of course, the movement just dies.

There’ll be plenty of male examples today so I wanted to start with a female example, the enigmatic **Joan of Arc** ... who back in the 15th century inspired the French king to fight against the English army which was occupying France ... claiming that she had received revelations from Jesus and the saints. Under her leadership, the French liberated Orleans and parts of central France. Her movement lasted a year or so before she was captured and killed as a heretic for claiming to follow the voice of God. After her death, the situation between the French and English reverted to a stalemate for another 30 years. So in her case, the death of the charismatic leader effectively stopped the movement.



Unlike Joan of Arc, American black civil rights leader **Martin Luther King Junior** shunned violence. Taking his lead from Jesus, King led peaceful protests even in the face of police brutality. He painted a vision of America freed from the divisions of race and injustice. After King’s assassination, the civil rights movement stalled and subsequent Presidents focused on law and order and policing rather than solving the systemic issues of racism in America. Fast forward 50 years and racism and

police brutality against blacks continues, highlighted by the **Black Lives Matter** protests. So the death of the charismatic leader in this case didn’t kill the movement, but did stall it and affect its goals.

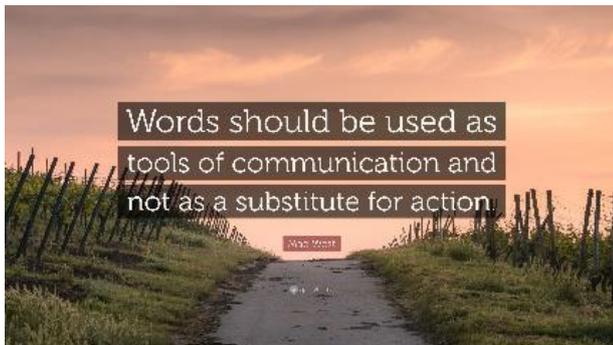
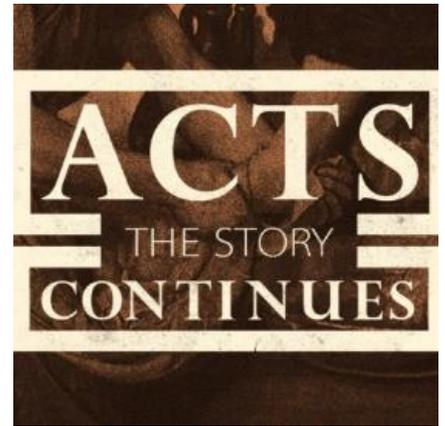
So what happened to the Jesus movement when its charismatic founder was killed? Was that the end of the story, as suggested by three of the four Gospels? The Gospel writer Luke takes a very different perspective. He sees the death and resurrection of Jesus not as the **climax** or **end** of the story but rather as its **pivot point**.

Luke writes another whole book – that we know as the **book**



of Acts – as the **continuation** of the story of the Jesus movement over the next 30 years from the death of Jesus in Jerusalem to the gradual spread of the movement in every direction until it reaches what was considered to be the centre of the world, namely Rome.

It is only Luke who describes how those early disciples, numbering around 100 people – including the women – found new found courage and boldness – and how they continued to proclaim a message built on the good news of Jesus, despite facing persecution most places they went ... as we will hear over the next few weeks as we explore the book of Acts.



Now effective communication of a message requires both **words** and **actions** – appealing words need to be backed up with appropriate action, which will be our focus next week.

As you well know, we are currently in midst of a Federal election campaign where communication is vital. The media focus falls largely on the main leaders

and their message ...

As we listen to the stage managed announcements each day, we would do well to stop and ask ourselves what is the central message of each party or are there just lots of shallow promises being made that appeal to our innate selfishness and greed, or that stoke our fear?

Is there some sort of overall **vision** for the future, of how our society could improve for **everyone**, not just those at the top of the pile?

And for us as people who profess to being followers of Jesus, how closely do the policies of the parties reflect the teaching and priorities of Jesus?

I wonder how well you feel the various leaders are communicating their key message to voters ... I guess we'll know on 22 May!



Coming back to the early disciples ...

Did they have a clear communication strategy?

What was the main message that they communicated?

Who communicated the message and how was it received?

Let's quickly try to unpack those questions ...

The **main message** centres on Jesus ... who is remembered as someone who preached good news to the poor and who healed the sick ... before being killed by the Jewish leaders (... as an aside, it's interesting that the early Christian claim is that Jesus was killed by the **Jewish leaders** rather than by the **Roman state** ... there's some political spin for you ... especially if Luke was writing to Romans). This Jesus, Luke persistently tells us, was then raised back to life by God and called his followers to take his core message to others.



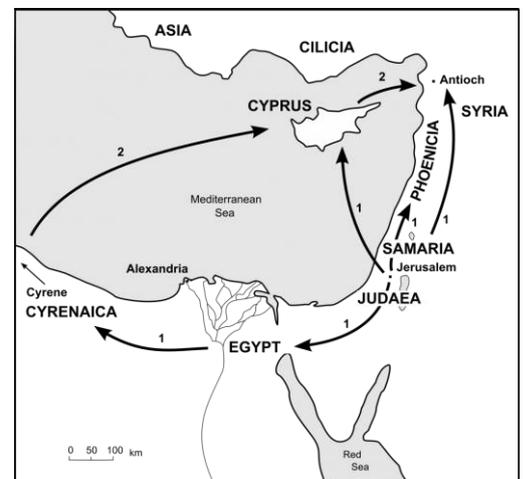
For Luke, the core message of the apostles is a call for people to repent and turn back to God and to receive forgiveness or release from sin. For the apostle John, the core message is that new and abundant life is available by faith in Jesus, while for Paul it is reconciliation and peace with God.

The communication strategy is simple and is built on Jesus' call to be witnesses ...

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

The disciples walk in the loving and compassionate ways of Jesus in their daily life and then whenever an opportunity arises, explain in words who Jesus is and offer a brief outline of his life and death and resurrection.

Initially it is the **apostles** who speak the message (apostle = sent ones ... the close circle of followers sent by Jesus) ... but within a few years it is **ordinary, nobody Christians** who take the message across to Cyprus, up the coast to Phoenicia and Syria and into northern Africa to Cyrene. These everyday Christians were sharing the good news of Jesus well before Paul is on the scene and organizing deliberate mission trips.



In the middle decades of the first century that Luke is writing about, this good news about Jesus was a fairly radical message - but it was built on the **foundations of Judaism** – namely that there is a one and only God who is the Creator, the God who rescued Israel from Egypt and the same God who provides guidelines for how to live a good life. The new part of the message was the person and role of **Jesus** who claimed to have a unique relationship with God as God's Son and who revealed what God is like in a new way, who was subsequently killed for upsetting the religious authorities but who was raised back to life by God.

2000 years later, this message is considered old and well known by many, at least at a superficial

level, yet it is still fresh and life-transforming. So is there still a need for us to share this message with others – through our **words**.

And it is here that many of us run into various **difficulties** and **fears** ...

we imagine that we have nothing to say

or don't have the right words to speak

or worry that other people don't want to hear the message and will laugh at us or reject us

Those same difficulties and fears were there for the original followers of Jesus – amplified by the fact that the Jewish leaders were intent on silencing them ... permanently if possible ... and by violent means if necessary.

It would have been much more convenient for Peter and John to slink back to Galilee and resume fishing for a livelihood. But they felt both **empowered** and **impelled** to speak about Jesus. I'm sure they were afraid, but they chose to walk the way of courage and to speak openly about Jesus.

Right through the Bible, people make various excuses to God about why they couldn't speak to others about God ...

- **Moses** complained that he couldn't speak well
- **Jeremiah** complained that he was too young
- **Paul** admitted that he'd been mistaken about Jesus but was comfortable persecuting Christians

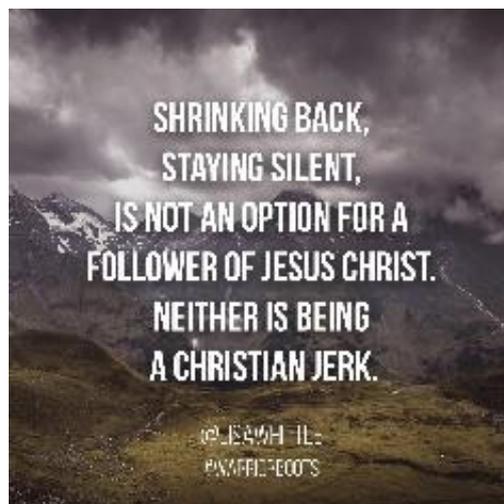
We too may be nervous about our abilities.

We may be afraid of what others may think.

We may reckon that we have nothing to say.

But that doesn't mean that we stay silent ...

... if my friends had never shared with me anything about God or Jesus then it's safe to say that I would not be a Christian today. Likewise, for each one of us, there was someone or perhaps several people who cared enough to share the good news with us. They might have been our parents, or someone speaking at a church service or on a church camp, or someone speaking with us one to one in a quiet moment. Perhaps they asked us a simple question to ponder or asked us to reflect on some aspect of life. But somewhere along each of our journeys, someone spoke to us about Jesus and following his way.



The thing about being a witness for Jesus is that our perspective is **personal** and **unique** to each of us. We share from **our own experience** of faith, which will be slightly different to other people. So even among the followers of Jesus, the perspective of Peter was

a little different to that of Paul, which I'm sure was quite different to the perspective of Joanna or Mary or the other women disciples, whose experience at the cross and at the empty tomb were both unique and vital to the emerging message of the early Christians.

Words of course, are not the only way that we communicate our faith. Next week we'll be thinking about our **actions** and recalling that the early disciples were not initially known as Christians but as **followers of the way of Jesus**, which suggests that how they lived and how they interacted with others was both noteworthy and influential. But that's for next week.

Today we're thinking about **words**. And words really do matter.

But I've spoken enough words.

I want to leave a time of silence now for you to ponder and perhaps talk to God about how you've struggled to share the good news about Jesus using words. Ask God to help you and to nudge you with the right words to speak at the right time.